

## Filling out census form just makes good sense Chicago Sun-Times, March 18, 2010, Commentary

When census time rolls around, every American should stand up and be counted.

More than 120 million questionnaires started showing up in mailboxes this week. Unfortunately, close to a third of the forms probably won't be filled out and returned, often because people just forget.

But if the Census Bureau were to count critics, it might discover that a worrisome number of voices say it's OK or even praiseworthy not to return the questionnaires.

Illegal immigrants fear census data could be used to deport them. Libertarians say the Census Bureau has constitutional authority only to tote up the number of Americans -- and ask no questions. Still other Americans say they don't trust that the information they give will remain confidential; they point out how census data were used in World War II to locate and intern Japanese Americans.

It's a little surprising that such worries are on the upswing this year, given that the 2010 census form is one of the shorter forms in decades, with only 10 straightforward questions. The long form, sent in earlier 10-year censuses to a percentage of homes, has been replaced by surveys that are conducted more frequently.

While this year's questionnaire has been pared down, filling it out remains as important as ever.

Census data are used to fairly allocate congressional seats among the 50 states. The data also are used to draw fair districts within states. They are the basis for the allocation of \$400 billion in federal money for a wide range of programs.

The census is fundamental to developing public policy, such as deciding where to give vouchers for subsidized apartments.

"You want policymakers to have accurate information," says Rebel Cole, a professor of real estate and finance at DePaul University. "Otherwise, they are basing policy on inaccurate information."

As for worries that the feds might misuse census data, safeguards since the abuses of World War II have been strengthened greatly.

"The Census Act has been amended a number of times, and every time it has increased the confidentiality protections," says John H. Thompson, president of the National Opinion Research Center and the top administrator for the 2000 census.

Eventually, most Americans do cooperate with the census, if only because they may be visited up to six times by a census taker.

But all those census takers cost taxpayers an extra \$1.5 billion.

Thompson offers this advice: "Mail back your form."

It's the law, and it makes good sense.